

In situations where inequality and ethnicity are important aspects of poverty, policymakers need to understand the range of strategies people use to survive. Different groups within communities use different livelihood strategies, according to their wealth. To achieve sustainable development, policies must be targeted at their varying needs.

Research from the SOAS Centre for Development, Environment and Policy, University of London, in the UK, analyses the resource use and livelihood strategies adopted by different groups within two rural Mayan communities in the south-Eastern Mexican state of Yucatán. The researcher suggests various ways in which access to markets and services can help reduce poverty.

Despite the focus of the Millennium Development Goals on poverty reduction, halving 'the proportion of the population living on less than \$1 a day' fails to address the elements of inequality that characterise poverty. In Mexico, stark regional disparities in terms of education, infrastructure and poverty are often linked to ethnicity. Indigenous Mayan communities such as those in Yucatán State are particularly deprived.

Studies of poverty and inequality in Latin America have tended to generalise, with some researchers suggesting people can escape poverty by migrating to urban areas, developing agriculture or diversifying into non-farm occupations with government support. But the extent to which people in marginalised regions can integrate into the wider economy varies, and depends mostly upon the assets they possess and the resources they have access to. Understanding of the local context is essential.

The Mayas' dependence on agricultural and forest resources means their development has to be ecologically and economically sustainable.

The Mayan communities studied, Mahas and Poop, remain economically isolated. Key findings regarding successful livelihood strategies include:

- Despite debate about the sustainability of slash and burn practices, maize ('milpa') cultivation is a way of life for the Mayas – access to maize-producing land is a valuable asset, not least because it attracts state subsidies.
- Small livestock are culturally and economically important – livestock enterprises can be brought into sustainable production systems.
- Ownership of beehives provides the opportunity to enter into relatively profitable honey production and provides important forest eco-services.
- User rights to fruit trees are similarly important.
- Active agribusiness marketing is open to those with means of transport and finance to assemble and sell products, the necessary business skills and an ability to create trading networks.

While the poorest people use maize production subsidies as a safety net, wealthier groups engage in the maize economy commercial enterprise. It therefore provides not just subsidies and subsistence but also the cash income that comes from trading maize products. Different policies to create a broader asset base must be applied at different socio-economic levels:

- for well-off and slightly better-off groups: information and advice to expand local enterprises and multiply benefits in the community and consideration to expanding the markets for consumer goods and services
- for poor and very poor groups: maize subsidies are a critical intervention
- for these groups, long-term support is also important, for example to develop honey production, small livestock and crafts (through transfers and loans) and information on the labour market
- traders should be accountable to local institutions to restrain unsustainable exploitation of natural resources.

Before appropriate development interventions can be identified, and poverty and sustainability issues addressed, a detailed understanding of poor people's assets, strategies and the local context is required.